Religion in World Affairs

The Protestant Deformation and American Foreign Policy

by James Kurth

Analysts have debated for decades about the relative influence of the various factors that shape American foreign policy. National interests, domestic politics, economic interests, and liberal ideology have each been nominated as the major source of the peculiarities of American conduct in foreign affairs. But although numerous scholars stress the importance of realism, idealism, capitalism, or liberalism, almost no one has thought that Protestantism—the dominant religion in the United States—is worthy of consideration. Certainly in the twentieth century it has seemed abundantly clear that one can (and should) write the history of American foreign policy with no reference to Protestantism whatsoever.

This essay will present the alternative view. It will argue that American foreign policy has been, and continues to be, shaped by the Protestant origins of the United States, but with a twist. For the Protestantism that has shaped foreign policy over two centuries has not been the original religion but a series of successive departures from it down the scale of what might be called the Protestant declension. We are now at the end point of this declension, and the Protestantism that shapes foreign policy today is a peculiar heresy of the original religion, not from the Protestant Reformation but rather what might be called the Deformation. Today, with the United States left as the sole superpower, this deformation enjoys its greatest global influence. But because it is such a peculiar religion, and indeed is correctly perceived by all the other religions as a fundamental and fatal threat, its pervasive sway is generating intense resistance and even international conflict.

Protestantism and International Politics in History

The Protestant religion was an enormous force shaping international politics in the early modern era. Together with the Italian Renaissance, the

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commercial revolution, and the European discovery of the New World, the Reformation was one of the four major movements that initiated the modern era itself during the early sixteenth century.

The long struggle between the Protestant Reformation and the Catholic Counter-Reformation—the Wars of Religion—culminated in the Thirty Years' War (1618–1648). That war was concluded with the Peace of Westphalia and the establishment of what scholars of international relations have termed "the Westphalian system" of independent states. Most analysts of international politics consider the Treaty of Westphalia to be the beginning of the modern state system and of international politics as we have known it down until recent times.

The Westphalian system was one of the consequences of the Protestant Reformation.

Prior to the Thirty Years' War, central Europe had been dominated by the Habsburgs of Austria, who were Roman Catholic and who ordered the region within the elaborate and hierarchical framework of the Holy Roman Empire, a legacy from the medieval era. The four major movements of the modern era were bringing about the development of nation-states in western Europe, especially in the Protestant countries of the Netherlands and England, but within the structure of the Holy Roman Empire the nation-state did not yet exist.

The Thirty Years' War resulted in a substantial decline in the power of the Habsburgs, and the Treaty of Westphalia ratified a comparable decline in the authority of the Holy Roman Empire. An international structure composed of a hierarchy of emperor, kings, princes, and cities was replaced with one composed of many formally independent and formally equal states. Some of these states, of course, were more independent, "more equal," than others, and these would later become known as great powers. The Treaty of Westphalia was the recognition that Europe was no longer one empire but a system of many powers—a multipolar system.

In the view of some international relations analysts, the Westphalian multipolar system was replaced after 1945 with the cold war bipolar system, which in turn was replaced after 1991 with the post–cold war unipolar system. But although the number of truly great powers has decreased, the number of formally independent states has increased. In this sense, the Westphalian state system remains the one we still live in today. And that system was one of the great consequences of the Protestant Reformation and the Wars of Religion.

The leading powers during the Wars of Religion and later in the early Westphalian state system included ones that were Catholic (Habsburg Spain, Habsburg Austria, France, and Poland), Protestant (the Netherlands, England, Sweden, and Brandenburg-Prussia), Eastern Orthodox (Russia), and even Muslim (Ottoman Turkey). Among these powers, however, the Protestant ones had a distinctive character. The first such was the Netherlands, followed soon after by England. They became great powers because they boasted the leading commercial economies and navies of the time, and they clearly illustrate the connection between the Protestant ethic and the capitalist spirit, which Max Weber analyzed so acutely. To be sure, the Netherlands and England were

rather small countries, in terms of territory and land forces, but they were superior in their ability to organize their limited resources with maximum effectiveness. This implicit connection between the Protestant ethic and the spirit of social mobilization was also illustrated by the two leading Protestant land powers, first Sweden in the seventeenth century and then Prussia in the eighteenth century. Each was unusual in its ability to organize limited resources with maximum effectiveness in ways that astonished the other (and Catholic) land powers.

By the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Westphalian state system thus developed into the classical balance-of-power system composed of several great powers. The Protestant powers were better organized than their Catholic (and Orthodox and Muslim) rivals, but the non-Protestant powers possessed large territories and armies, and some had begun to develop their own ways of improving administrative efficiency. The result was a rough equivalence in the resources that the powers actually deployed in the arena of international politics, and in the weight that they threw into the balance of power.

By 1700, the objectives that the Protestant powers pursued in international politics were not substantially different from those pursued by non-Protestant powers, and they were almost wholly confined to the secular goals of territory, wealth, and power. One can thus write (as almost all scholars have done) the history of European international politics in the eighteenth century without reference to the Protestant religion.

For the most part, this is true of the history of European international politics in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as well, with a couple of important exceptions. In the 1880s and 1890s, Protestantism helped to inspire the expansion of empire, especially in tropical Africa, where British rule was extended into certain areas in order to protect Protestant missionaries even when few other reasons existed to do so.

Much more significantly, in the 1860s and 1870s, Protestantism shaped the way Prussia expanded as it established the new German empire. After Prussia defeated Austria in the war of 1866, many German nationalists advocated Prussia's annexation of the Germans living in Habsburg domains, thereby unifying virtually all Germans into a single *Grossdeutschland.* However, since the Germans in Austria were Catholic, that would have made Catholics a majority in the new German national state and was unacceptable to Bismarck and the Prussian Protestants. The way that unification eventually came about in 1871 after the Franco-Prussian War (annexation of some Catholic South German states, but not Catholic Austria) insured that Protestants would enjoy a two-thirds majority in the new German empire.

Although Germany would not annex Austria for religious reasons, it could ally with Austria-Hungary for strategic ones. This it did in 1879, and that alliance would have fateful, and fatal, consequences in 1914. By then, however, it appeared that Protestant religion had ceased to have any effect upon European international politics. A certain degree of shared Protestantism between Britain and Germany did not inhibit them from fighting each other in the First World War for four terrible years.

Looking back over several centuries, then, one might sum up the impact of the Protestant religion upon the foreign policies of the European powers as follows. In the seventeenth century, Protestantism had a major effect on both the goals of foreign policy and the means of achieving them. In the eighteenth century, it had almost no effect on the goals but still had a major effect on the means. In the nineteenth century, it had an occasional effect on the goals and still had a minor effect on the means. And in the twentieth century, it has had almost no effect on either the goals or the means.

The United States entered into the secularized Westphalian state system at the end of the eighteenth century. Like the Netherlands and England before it, it soon became a leading commercial economy and naval power. This can be explained in part by the Protestant religion of much of the American population. But the goals and objectives that the United States pursued in international politics were not substantially different from those pursued by non-Protestant powers. They were almost wholly the secular goals of territory, wealth, and power. There was some anti-Catholic rhetoric during the Mexican War (1846–48), the Spanish-American War (1898), and the Central American interventions (1890s–1920s). But one can write (and almost all scholars have done so) the entire history of American foreign policy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries without reference to the Protestant religion.

These conclusions about the negligible influence of the Protestant religion on European or American foreign policies are based upon too narrow a view. If one looks at the way the original Protestant religion was transformed or mutated in the United States into other versions of Protestantism, different conclusions will emerge.

The Protestant Reformation versus Hierarchy and Community

Protestantism was a protest—a protest against the form that the Christian religion had taken in the Roman Catholicism of the late Middle Ages and Renaissance. The Reformation was an effort to reform the Christian religion back to the original faith and order expressed in the New Testament (meaning New Covenant) of the Bible. The faith of the New Testament had itself been a protest against the form that the Jewish religion had taken under Pharisaic auspices at the time of the early Roman Empire. Although the central feature of Christianity, Jesus Christ as the Messiah, was a radical break with traditional Judaism, early Christianity was also in part an effort to reform the Jewish religion back to the original faith expressed in the Old Covenant, or Old Testament, of the Bible.

Protestantism therefore was decisively shaped by what might be seen as a double reformation or double rejection. There was clearly the contemporary reformation or rejection of Roman Catholicism, but this reformation or rejection was in the name of an original faith that was in turn a reformation or rejection of Pharisaic Judaism.

What were the features of Roman Catholicism that the Protestant reformers wished to reform, and what features of Pharisaic Judaism had the original Christians wished to reform? As it happened, the two sets of features had much in common, reinforcing the definition of what had to be rejected.

The Protestant reformers protested against numerous features of the Roman Catholic Church, including such familiar ones as the authority of the pope, the role of the Virgin Mary, and the meaning of indulgences. But the central and fundamental issues involved the way by which the Christian believer achieved a state of salvation and the roles that the priestly hierarchy and the parish community played in that process. The Roman Church taught that the believer reached salvation through the mediation of the priestly hierarchy, obedience to divine Law as interpreted by the hierarchy, and through participation in the parish community. The hierarchy and the community in combination yielded the surest path to salvation, which was participation in communal sacraments and rituals administered by the hierarchy.

Similarly, Pharisaic Judaism had taught that the devout Jew reached holiness through observance of the Law and the Commandments as interpreted by the rabbis, which was aided by the mediation of the Jewish priesthood and through participation in the Jewish community. Here, too, the combination of hierarchy and community yielded the highest degree of holiness, observance which included participation in communal sacrifices and rituals that were administered by the priesthood in the temple in Jerusalem.

The Protestant reformers protested against the idea that the believer *achieves* salvation through a hierarchy or a community, or even the two in combination. Although many Protestant reformers accepted hierarchy and community for certain purposes, such as church governance and collective undertakings, they rejected them for the most important of purposes, reaching the state of salvation. Rather, the believer *receives* salvation through an act of grace by God. This grace produces in its recipient the faith in God and salvation that converts him into a believer.

The believer can achieve greater knowledge of God, however, through his reading of the Holy Scriptures. Protestant reformers placed great emphasis on the Word, as revealed in the written words of the Bible. But this reading did not necessarily require the interpretations of a hierarchy or a community. Indeed, these might actually impede the right interpretation of the Bible by the individual believer.

All religions are unique, but Protestantism is "more unique" than all others. No other is so critical of hierarchy and community, or of the traditions and customs that go with them. Indeed, most other religions are based upon hierarchy or community (not only Roman Catholicism, but Eastern Orthodoxy, Islam, Hinduism, Confucianism, and even, to a degree, Buddhism). At its doctrinal base, however, Protestantism is anti-hierarchy and anti-community. Thus, Protestantism is a double rejection in a double sense. It is a rejection of both its experience of Roman Catholicism and its image of Pharisaic Judaism, and it is a rejection of both hierarchy and community.

Protestant reformers sought to remove hierarchy and community so that the individual Christian believer could have a direct relationship with God. More accurately and subtly, they did so in order that the individual believer could have a relationship with God directly through the second person of the Holy Trinity, Jesus Christ, and so that he could receive salvation from God directly from the third person of the Holy Trinity, the Holy Spirit.

The removal of hierarchy and community, traditions and customs—of any earthly intermediaries between the individual and God—strips away, at least for the most important purposes, any local, parochial, cultural, or national characteristics of the believer. In principle, grace, faith, and salvation can be received by anyone in the world, and thus they are truly universal or "catholic," in the original sense of the latter term. The Protestant reformers saw the vast variety of cultures and nations through a universal perspective, one that was even more universal than that of the Roman Catholic Church.

The Protestant Churches and Church Governance

Despite their doctrinal rejection of hierarchy and community for the purpose of salvation, many Protestant churches maintained some kind of hierarchy for purposes of church governance. The most hierarchical were those Protestant churches ruled by bishops and archbishops—the Lutherans (Germany and the Scandinavian countries), Anglicans (England), Episcopalians (the United States), and Methodists (England and the United States). The word Episcopal is itself derived from the Greek word for bishop, and the organization of some European churches, particularly the Anglican and Lutheran, much resembled the organization of the Roman Catholic Church, albeit with the pope replaced by a "defender of the faith" in the form of the secular ruler. The secular and political counterpart of this form of church governance, for both Roman Catholicism and this version of Protestantism was, of course, monarchy.

Less hierarchical were those Protestant churches ruled by elders—the Calvinists (the Netherlands) and the Presbyterians (Scotland and the United States). The word Presbyterian is derived from the Greek word for elder. Indeed, this form of organization looked rather like the organization of Pharisaic (and later) Judaism around councils of rabbis. The secular and political counterpart of this form of church governance was aristocracy or oligarchy.

Least hierarchical were those Protestant churches ruled by the congregations themselves. Many of these were in the United States—the Congregationalists, the Baptists, and a vast variety of American denominational and especially nondenominational churches. The secular and political counterpart of this form of church governance was, of course, democracy.

Despite their differences in regard to church governance and similar differences in regard to community emphasis, however, all Protestant churches rejected hierarchy and community as the means to salvation. At the level of fundamental theology and doctrine, Protestantism denies that hierarchy and community are of fundamental importance. Indeed, Protestants often assert that

hierarchy and community, along with the traditions and customs that go with them, are obstacles to what is of fundamental importance—the way that the individual Christian believer reaches the state of salvation.

The Protestant Spread into Secular Life

In the three centuries after the Reformation, this Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community in regard to salvation spread to their rejection in regard to other domains of life as well. We have already seen that some Protestant churches rejected hierarchy and community in regard to church governance and local undertakings. This was especially the case in the new United States, where the conjunction of the open frontier and the disestablishment of churches in the several states enabled the flourishing of new unstructured and unconstrained denominations.

By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community spread to important arenas of temporal or secular life. Again, this was especially the case in the new United States. In the economic arena, the elimination of hierarchy (monopoly or oligopoly) and community (guilds or trade restrictions) meant the establishment of the free market. In the political arena, the elimination of hierarchy (monarchy or aristocracy) and community (traditions and customs) meant the establishment of liberal democracy.

However, the free market could not become so free, nor liberal democracy become so liberal, that they degenerated into anarchy. Although they could no longer be ordered by hierarchy and community, or by tradition and custom, they had to be ordered by something. That something reflected the Protestant emphasis on the written word and was a version of the written covenant among individual Protestant believers. In the economic arena, this was the written contract; in the political arena, it was the written constitution.

The Protestant Reformation was giving birth to what by the early twentieth century would become the American Creed. The fundamental elements of that secular creed—liberal democracy, free markets, constitutionalism, and the rule of law—were already fully in place in the United States of the early nineteenth century.

This outer spread of the Protestant rejection of hierarchy and community from the arena of salvation to the arenas of economics and politics was driven by a particular inner dynamic, or rather decline, within the Protestant faith itself. Today, almost half a millennium after the beginning of the Protestant Reformation in 1517, we can discern six stages of what might be called the Protestant declension.

The Six Stages of the Protestant Declension

1. Salvation by grace. At the personal level the original Protestant (and original Christian) experience was that of a direct, loving, and saving relationship

between the believer and God. This direct relationship and state of salvation is brought about by God, through his sovereign love or *grace*, and not by the person, through his own efforts or *works*. This is the experience of being "born again" into a new life.

Obviously, anything that could stand in the way of this direct relationship (e.g., any intermediaries, traditions, or customs) must be swept aside. The original Protestant and "born again" Christian experiences his new life as an open field, a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. This enables him also to experience a release of previously constrained energies and an intense focus of them upon new undertakings. This in part explains the great energy and efficacy of some newly Christian persons. When the number of such persons is greatly multiplied, as it was at the time of the Reformation, it also in part explains the great energy and efficacy of some newly Protestant nations (e.g., the Netherlands, England, and Sweden).

2. Grace evidenced through work. However, a serious problem soon arises, within a generation and indeed with the next generation. The children of the original "born again" Protestants are born into a Protestant family and church, but they themselves may not be "born again" Protestants, that is, they may not have personally experienced grace, and the direct relationship with God and the state of salvation that it brings. As Max Weber famously discussed in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, this can give rise to great anxiety about just what kind of state the second generation Protestants occupy.

For persons in some Protestant churches, especially the Anglican and Lutheran state churches of Europe but even the Episcopal and Lutheran churches in America, something of a solution lay close at hand. These churches had remained hierarchical and even somewhat communal. Perhaps, in some way that was not theologically evident but was psychologically reassuring, the state of salvation could be reached by participation in the rituals and works of the church. In these churches, therefore, the focus upon grace gradually shifted in practice to a focus upon works, as had been the case in the Roman Catholic Church before the Reformation.

However, for persons in other Protestant churches, especially those known as the Reformed churches—the Calvinist churches of Europe but also the Presbyterian and Congregational churches in America—the solution to the dilemma of the Protestants who were "born in" but not "born again" had to be different. The stricter Reformed theology of these churches did not easily permit the fading away of the need for grace. Furthermore, their relative lack of hierarchical and communal features meant that they had a less developed structure for the exercise of rituals and works. And yet, without the personal experience of grace, what evidence was there that the second generation or birthright Protestants had received it?

As Weber discussed, the evidence for grace became a particular and peculiar kind of works, not the performance of works in the church, but the success of work in the world. This was how the Protestant ethic became the capitalist spirit. Because the Reformed churches had reformed away the legitimacy of hierarchy, community, tradition, and custom, this work in the world could

be unconstrained by these obstacles. Thus, the second and later generation's version of Reformed Protestants also could experience worldly life and worldly work as an open field, a blank slate, a *tabula rasa*. This enabled them also to experience a release of previously constrained energies and an intense focus of them upon new undertakings. Indeed, this version of Protestantism in its worldly work was so focused that it became methodical and systematic in ways that previously had never been seen. This also in part explains the great energy and efficacy of some second and later generation Reformed Protestants. Again, when the number of such persons was greatly multiplied, it also in part explains the great energy and efficacy of established Protestant nations, not just for the second generation, but for several generations thereafter (e.g., the Netherlands and Sweden until the eighteenth century; England, Scotland, and America until the nineteenth).

3. Salvation by works. After several generations of this kind of Reformed Protestantism, a certain Protestant culture, even traditions and customs, developed. The number of Protestants who had experienced the culture, but who had not experienced the grace, greatly increased. Finally, even in the Reformed churches (Calvinist, Presbyterian, Congregational), the idea of the necessity of grace began to fade. Work in the world was no longer seen as a sign of grace but as a good in itself. Work as a good became a new version of good works.

4. The Unitarian transformation. As the focus on grace faded, so too among some was there a fading of the focus upon the agencies of grace, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit, the second and the third persons of the Holy Trinity. Thus Reformed Protestantism, with its highly articulated Trinitarian doctrine, turned into Unitarianism, with its abstract concept of a Supreme Being or Divine Providence. Unitarianism was an actual denomination, complete with its own churches, but it was also a more widely held theology and philosophy. This was a stage in the Protestant declension that a portion of some of the American political elite, including some of the Founding Fathers, had reached by the beginning of the nineteenth century. Public documents of that time frequently made reference to the Supreme Being or Divine Providence, but rarely to Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit.

5. The American Creed. The fifth stage in the Protestant declension was reached when the abstract and remote God, the Supreme Being or Divine Providence, disappeared altogether. Now the various Protestant creeds were replaced by the American Creed, which reached its fullest articulation in the first half of the twentieth century. The elements of the American Creed were free markets and equal opportunity, free elections and liberal democracy, and constitutionalism and the rule of the law. The American Creed definitely did not include as elements hierarchy, community, tradition, and custom. Although the American Creed was not itself Protestant, it was clearly the product of a Protestant culture and was a sort of secularized version of Protestantism.

6. Universal human rights. The sixth and final stage in the Protestant declension was reached only in the 1970s, that is, in the last generation. The American Creed was then replaced by the universal conception of human rights or, more accurately, the elements of the American Creed were generalized into

universal goods. When, in the 1990s, the collapse of the Soviet Union and communist ideology, the stagnation of the German social market and Japanese organized capitalism, and the debacle of the newly industrializing Asian countries and their developmental capitalism appeared to remove all alternatives to American economic and political conceptions, the American Creed seemed to some triumphalists to have achieved the status of a world religion.

The Protestant Declension and U.S. Foreign Policy

At its birth at the end of the eighteenth century, the United States was populated by a wide variety of Protestants ranging from Episcopalians, Methodists, and Presbyterians to Congregationalists, Baptists, and Unitarians. And they were found on a wide spectrum of the Protestant declension ranging through its first four stages from "born again" Christians to Unitarians. No one church and no one stage represented a majority of the American population (or even of that part of the white male population which comprised the only persons with the right to vote). This condition of Protestant pluralism meant that public pronouncements on religious themes that honored citizens situated in one church or stage were just as likely to offend those situated in another. This drove public officials to a religious rhetoric of the least common (and least offensive) denominator. Hence the rhetoric of Unitarianism, which was the fourth stage of the Protestant declension, captured public discourse. For inasmuch as all American Protestants could not believe in the full implications of each of the three persons of the Holy Trinity, they could all believe that God was a supreme being and that Providence was divine. The adoption of this Unitarian rhetoric was facilitated by the fact that some in the political elite already believed it.

In the early nineteenth century, periodic religious revivals burst forth among portions of the American population. These moved some Protestants back up the scale to higher stages of belief, but this did not change the religious rhetoric in public pronouncements. The logic of religious pluralism, reinforced by the substantial numbers of Roman Catholic and Jews immigrating to the United States in the 1840s and after, continued to drive public officials even further toward a rhetoric of the least common (and least offensive) denominator. This would be a public rhetoric which, while it would use conceptions that were congruent and congenial to the Protestant ones, would make almost no references to religion at all. In regard to economic matters, the central conception was the free market to be ordered by contracts. In regard to political matters, it was liberal democracy to be ordered by the Constitution. And this was the precise mentality—ideology—described so brilliantly and beautifully by that young Frenchman who was both an aristocrat and a liberal, Alexis de Tocqueville, in *Democracy in America* (1834). The full development of these ideas would eventually lead to the fifth stage of the Protestant declension, the American Creed.

During the nineteenth century, these transformations down the scale of Protestant declension did not have much impact upon American foreign

policy, even though they had tremendous impact upon American domestic politics (including the origins of the Civil War). As long as the United States was focused upon the great task of westward expansion across the North American continent and as long as it was on the western margins of the international competition among the European great powers, the American ideology of the free market and liberal democracy could have little effect upon international affairs. Its chief foreign impact was upon the native American tribes (which, however, were sometimes called "nations"), the Mexican population annexed by the United States after the Mexican War, and upon a few island peoples (especially Hawaiian) targeted by American missionaries.

With the beginning of the twentieth century, all this changed. The grand project of continental expansion was completed and replaced within a decade by a new project of overseas expansion, at first into the Caribbean, Central America, and the Pacific. Following the U.S. victory in the Spanish-American War and its construction of the Great White Fleet, the era in which the United States was on the margins of great-power competition gave way to an era in which the United States was clearly one of the great global powers.

In the nineteenth century the United States had few opportunities to express its particular ideology in foreign policy. Now it had many opportunities to do so. And for some Americans, most obviously President Woodrow Wilson but also most U.S. presidents from Franklin D. Roosevelt to Bill Clinton, opportunity has been redefined as necessity.

Woodrow Wilson was a Presbyterian and the son of a Presbyterian clergyman. His pronouncements on public policy, however, seem to have more in common with Unitarianism than with Presbyterianism. He seems to have believed that he was carrying out God's will, but he does not seem to have given much thought to the other persons of the Trinity, Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit. As we have already discussed, this is not surprising from someone who was president of a vast nation characterized by a wide range of religious diversity and, even at that time, by a substantial amount of secularization.

Wilson's political identity was as a Progressive and his political program was known as "the New Freedom." These were congruent and isomorphic with his religious identity as a Presbyterian and his religious actuality as a Unitarian. Wilson believed deeply in free markets, ordered by written contracts, and in liberal democracy, ordered by a written constitution. He also seems to have believed that God meant for him to advance these ideals both at home and abroad, and thus "to make the world safe for democracy." Conversely, Wilson had almost no sensitivity or sympathy toward those non-Protestant conceptions of hierarchy, community, tradition, and custom.

These political and economic conceptions of Wilson were repeatedly expressed in his foreign policies: (1) his notion that the problems of Latin American countries could be solved by formal elections, written constitutions, and the enforcement of contracts; (2) his focus upon freedom of the seas, international law, and democratic ideology as he led the United States into the First World War; (3) his relentless opposition to the Habsburg monarchy, the very embodiment of hierarchy, community, tradition, and custom (and the only

Roman Catholic great power), in the name of national self-determination, itself an individualist or even Protestant conception irrelevant to a communal or even Catholic condition; and (4) his insistence upon the abstraction of collective security, as written down in the Covenant of the League of Nations, as the solution to the perennial problem of international conflict.[1]

Each of these notions seemed normal and obvious to Wilson and to millions of other Americans. Indeed, in their updated versions, they seem normal and obvious to Bill Clinton and millions of Americans today. They only seem normal and obvious, however, to a people that grew up in a culture shaped at its origins by Protestantism, rather than by some other religion. It is difficult to imagine an Eastern Orthodox, Muslim, Hindu, Confucian, Buddhist, or even Roman Catholic statesman expressing these notions so consistently and continuously as did Wilson and his fellow Americans. At least no such statesman comes readily to mind. It is even more difficult to imagine a statesman of secular convictions, but who grew up in a culture that was shaped by one of these other religions, developing this particular ideology. The ideologies of even such democratic secular figures as Jawaharlal Nehru, Sun Yat-sen, or Konrad Adenauer were quite different.

The last and grandest of Wilson's projects, the League of Nations, was of course a failure, being rejected in 1920 by the U.S. Senate and by millions of other Americans as well. But most of Wilson's Protestant-like notions became permanent features of American foreign policy.

It is a cliché of American diplomatic history that the United States "retreated into isolationism" after the First World War. In fact, this U.S. retreat or withdrawal really only applied to Europe (and there only in regard to security and military matters). In other regions of the world, particularly Latin America and East Asia, the United States continued and even expanded its presence in the 1920s under Republican administrations in much the same way as it had under the Wilson administration. Then, under the impact of the Great Depression of the 1930s, the administration of Franklin Roosevelt adopted new approaches toward Latin America (the Good Neighbor Policy and an end to U.S. military interventions) and East Asia (a renewed focus upon the Open Door Policy and China). But throughout the interwar period, American foreign policy in these two developing regions was dominated by the promotion of the central elements of what was by now the fully developed American Creed: free markets and equal opportunity, free elections and liberal democracy, and constitutionalism and the rule of law.

A central reason why the United States withdrew from European security matters after 1920 was because Americans had come to believe that they could not make over the European nations—economically developed, militarily strong, and politically independent—in America's image, i.e., they could not convert the European nations to the American Creed. In Latin America and East

[1] On Wilsonianism and "global meliorism," see Walter A. McDougall, *Promised Land, Crusader State: The American Encounter with the World since 1776* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997).

Asia—economically underdeveloped, militarily weak (except Japan), and politically dependent—it was a different story. Because of the weakness and therefore openness of these countries, it seemed plausible that they might actually be converted to American ways. Of course, this could only seem plausible if the cultural and social features, the traditions and customs, of these countries could be dismissed or ignored. But these features were formed around such religions as Catholicism and Confucianism, which, to the Protestant mind of Americans, seemed obviously retrograde and irrational. With just a little persuasive effort on the part of Americans, this would become obvious to Latin Americans and East Asians as well. Then they too would adopt some version of the American Creed.

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Thus, a characteristic pattern had developed in the conduct of American foreign policy in peacetime. When a country was strong in relation to the United States, particularly if it was a great power, American foreign policy tended to be marked by either prudence or distance, by either "realism" or "isolationism." The United States acted toward that country in ways similar to those of the other great powers. In contrast, however, when a country was weak in relation to the United States, American foreign policy was marked by the drive to convert that country to free markets and liberal democracy, by "idealism" (really secularized Protestantism). The United States sought to remake that country in the image of the American Creed.

A problem would arise, however, if the United States, while seeking to convert a particular weak region, came into conflict with a particular great power. Then the idealism and the insistence would come into conflict with the realism and the prudence. This of course is what happened from 1931 to 1941 when the American vision for China came into conflict with the expansion of Japan. The result was the U.S. entry into the Second World War.

In the course of that war, Franklin Roosevelt mobilized and deployed many of the same notions that Woodrow Wilson had promoted during the First World War. Formally, Roosevelt was an Episcopalian, whereas Wilson had been a Presbyterian, and his foreign policies were rather more realistic and pragmatic than those of Wilson. In their actual religious beliefs, however, they both seem to have been some kind of Unitarian, and in their wartime policies they both vigorously advanced free trade and liberal democracy. And, of course, Roosevelt brought about at the end of the war the resurrection of Wilson's League of Nations in the form of the United Nations.

After the Second World War, the characteristic pattern of American foreign policy—"realism" toward the strong and "idealism" toward the weak—developed further. When the United States was dealing with weak nations (and in the postwar era this was the condition of the European states and Japan), American foreign policy sought to remake them into an image resembling the American Creed. When the United States was dealing with other great powers (in the cold war era this was first the Soviet Union and later also China),

however, American foreign policy was different. An interim period of conflict with these communist powers over their weaker neighbors (Central and Eastern Europe for the Soviet Union; Korea, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia for China) was followed by the establishment of a rough division of the contested region into spheres of influence, and the ensuing U.S. policy tended to be marked by realism, be it prudence (toward the Soviet Union) or distance (toward China until 1973).

During the cold war, another characteristic of American foreign policy also reached its fullest development. This was the peculiarly American focus upon international organizations as the solution to international problems, a feature that we have already noted in Wilson's League of Nations and Roosevelt's United Nations. This characteristic also seems to have roots in Protestantism.

International Organizations and Protestant Conceptions

When great powers have become great enough to create a sphere of influence composed of themselves and several smaller states (usually neighbors in their own region), they have normally established some kind of international association which has served to legitimize and institutionalize their hegemony. These associations have usually been termed "confederations" or "leagues." Thus, Napoleon's France established the Confederation of the Rhine, Metterich's Austria the German Confederation and the Italian League, Bismarck's Prussia the North German Federation, and twentieth-century Britain the Commonwealth of Nations. This variety of examples demonstrates that great-power status and interest in themselves are a sufficient explanation for a great power establishing an international association.

In the history of international associations, however, the United States has a unique place. It has established more of them than any other great power, and indeed it has established more than all of the other great powers of the modern era combined. It has established them with a greater range of functions—economic as well as security—than the other great powers. It has established them with a greater degree of complexity, resulting not just in associations but in organizations or even institutions. And it has sought to establish not just organizations with a regional scope but also those with a global or universal scope as well. International organizations clearly occupy a central position in the American Creed in foreign policy.

Much of the U.S. focus upon international organizations can be explained by a realist theory of foreign policy. As the greatest of the great powers, it is to be expected that the United States would establish international organizations wherever its power or hegemony has extended. At first, this was only Latin America (the Pan-American Union, followed by the Organization of American States). After the First World War and then again after the Second World War, it briefly seemed to be the world itself (the League of Nations, followed by the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank). Then, during the cold war, U.S. power extended into several regions—Western Europe

(the North Atlantic Treaty Organization), the Middle East (the short-lived Central Treaty Organization), and Southeast Asia (the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization).

With the end of the cold war and the disappearance of any other great-power competitor, the United States has returned to the construction of international organizations with a global or universal scope (a new economic institution, the World Trade Organization, and an expanded role for the United Nations). But it also has continued to develop regional organizations (the North American Free Trade Area and expansion of NATO).

The establishment of these myriad international organizations in particular places at particular times can be explained by the particular opportunities for and limitations on American power. Still, the consistency and continuity of American sponsorship of international organizations does seem extraordinary. Americans clearly have both a drive and a gift for international organization that goes far beyond that found in any prior great powers. For these other nations, the most natural way of organizing international relations between a great power and smaller ones was through some sort of explicit hierarchy, ordered by customary deference. For Americans, the most natural way is through some sort of formal equality, ordered by a formal treaty. This American way is the only way that is congruent and isomorphic with the Protestant conceptions of ordering relations between individuals.

The American focus upon international organizations represents a bridge between the fifth stage of the Protestant declension, the American Creed, and the sixth stage, universal human rights. In the moment from one stage to the next, it almost seems that international organizations are transformed from being a means by which U.S. policymakers advance American foreign policy to being a means by which they advance abstract universal values.

Universal Human Rights and the Protestant Deformation

In the 1970s, American political and intellectual elites began to promote the notion of universal human rights as a fundamental goal of U.S. foreign policy. This conception took the central elements of the American Creed and carried them to a logical conclusion and to a universal extent.

A conjunction of factors caused American elites to embrace universal human rights at that time. First, those who had condemned the U.S. intervention in the Vietnam War needed to develop a foreign policy doctrine to replace that of containment, which in their eyes was now discredited. Secondly, the surge in U.S. trade and investment in newly industrializing countries beyond Europe and Japan caused some elites to see a need to develop a new doctrine that could be applied to a wide variety of different (and often difficult) countries and cultures. Most importantly, however, was the metamorphosis of America itself. It was changing from an industrial to a post-industrial economy and thus from a producer to a consumer mentality. It was also changing from a modern to a postmodern society and thus from an ideology of "possessive individualism"

to an ideology of "expressive individualism." The new post-industrial, consumer, postmodern, expressive individualist America was embodied in the "me generation"—the baby boomer generation. For this age-cohort, the rights (definitely not the responsibilities) of the individual (definitely not of the community) were the highest, indeed the only, good.

In the new ideology, human rights are thus seen as the rights of individuals. The individual's rights are independent of any hierarchy or community, traditions or customs, in which that individual might be situated. This means that human rights are applicable to any individual, anywhere in the world, that is, they are universal, and not merely communal or national. There is thus a close logical connection between the rights of the individual and the universality of those rights. Individual rights are universal rights, and universal rights are individual rights.

Numerous social analysts have noted that the United States has become in the past two decades a new kind of political society, what has been called "the republic of choice."[2] It is characterized by the "rights revolution" in law, "freedom of choice" in politics, "consumer sovereignty" in economics, "question authority" in attitudes, and "expressive individualism" in ideology. In regard to spiritual life, one manifestation of this new mentality is "New Age" religion or philosophy.

The ideology of expressive individualism thus reaches into all aspects of society; it is a total philosophy. The result appears to be totally opposite from the totalitarianism of the state, but it is a sort of totalitarianism of the self. Both totalitarianisms are relentless in breaking down intermediate bodies and mediating institutions that stand between the individual and the highest powers or the widest forces. With the totalitarianism of the state, the highest powers are the authorities of the ideological party-state; with the totalitarianism of the self, the widest forces are the agencies of the global economy.

Expressive individualism—with its contempt for and protest against all hierarchies, communities, traditions, and customs—represents the logical conclusion and the *ultima ratio* of the secularization of the Protestant religion. The Holy Trinity of original Protestantism, the Supreme Being of Unitarianism, and finally the United States of the American Creed have all been dethroned and replaced by the imperial self. The long declension of the Protestant Reformation has reached its end point in the Protestant Deformation. The Protestant Deformation is a Protestantism without God, a reformation against all forms.

The foreign policy of the republic of choice, of the Protestant Deformation, is universal human rights. But during the cold war, there were constraints on the full pursuit of this project. As long as the United States was engaged in its great bipolar struggle with the Soviet Union and communist ideology, it had to show some respect for and make some concessions to the particularities of hierarchy, community, traditions, and customs in the countries that it needed

[2] Lawrence M. Friedman, *The Republic of Choice: Law, Authority, and Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1990).

as allies. These concessions were often departures from the normal U.S. promotion of free markets and liberal democracy. In Western Europe and Japan, the United States accepted restrictions on free markets, while continuing to promote liberal democracy. In Latin America and Southeast Asia, in contrast, the United States accepted violations of liberal democracy, while continuing to promote free markets. Some of these concessions were beneficial to the people of the countries concerned, as when the United States accepted the policies of the Christian Democratic (usually Roman Catholic) parties and Socialist parties in Western Europe and supported the activities of the Roman Catholic Church in Eastern Europe. Some of these concessions were detrimental, as when the United States supported brutal dictatorships in Central America and the Caribbean.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the discrediting of communist ideology removed much of the necessity for such compromises and concessions. Now the United States could be unrestrained and uncontained in pursuit of its grand project of universal human rights. At the same time, the spread of the global economy and the competition among national governments to liberalize their economies in order to attract foreign capital legitimized the idea of free markets. Finally, the election of Bill Clinton in 1992 marked the arrival to political power of that generation of Americans who are true believers in expressive individualism—the baby boomers. The Clinton administration has promoted universal human rights more than any previous administration. It envisions human rights, free markets, and liberal democracy as the solutions to virtually every human problem.

As has been discussed by Samuel Huntington and others, this universalist and individualist project of the United States has generated resentment and resistance in societies whose religions traditions are different from the Christianity of the West. Huntington has called this "the clash of civilizations," a struggle between "the West and the rest."[3] There has been almost no resistance in those nations with a Protestant tradition, there has been some resistance in those with a Roman Catholic tradition, and there has been the greatest resistance in those with an Islamic or a Confucian tradition.

Virtually all nations whose religious tradition is Protestant have by now adopted some version of the human rights ideology, if not the full extent of expressive individualism and the republic of choice (Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the Netherlands, the Scandinavian countries, and even Britain and Germany). More resistant but now being driven into at least free markets and liberal democracy are those nations whose religious tradition is Roman Catholic (France, Italy, the former corporatist countries of Spain and Portugal, the former communist countries of Eastern Europe, and the former authoritarian and protectionist countries of Latin America). However, Pope John Paul II has consistently and comprehensively criticized particular elements of the American project (e.g., liberal ideology and the market economy) in several papal

[3] Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

encyclicals. The pope clearly recognizes that the liberal program, the Protestant Deformation, represents the idolatry of the self.

As Huntington and some of the authors of this special issue of *Orbis* have observed, the major resistance to this American universalist and individualist project has been mounted by countries with either an Islamic or a Confucian tradition. The contemporary, modernized versions of Islam and Confucianism represent a counterpart to the most secularized version of Protestantism, a sort of counter-deformation to the Protestant Deformation. However, Islam is split among numerous states, no one of which has much prospect of becoming a great power in international politics. Furthermore, the current crisis in several Asian economies has discredited capitalisms based upon "Asian values" of hierarchy and community, be they rooted in Islam (Indonesia and Malaysia) or in Confucianism (Japan, South Korea, and the Chinese communities in Indonesia and Malaysia).

We cannot now know the outcome of this "clash of civilizations," this struggle between the West and the rest, these wars of secularized religion. But the ultimate answer may lie in the character of the Protestant Deformation itself.

The Protestant Reformation and Deformation

The Protestant Reformation was a prime movement in the making of the modern era. Five hundred years later, the Protestant Deformation is a prime movement in the making of the postmodern era. The Protestant Reformation was the most unique of all religions. The Protestant Deformation seeks the end of all religions, or rather it seeks to replace the worship of God with the expression of the self.

The Protestant Reformation brought into being the first nation states and the first great powers of the modern era. The most Reformed Protestant of all nations was the United States, and it became the greatest of all great powers as well. Much of the power of the United States can be traced to the energy, efficacy, and organization that was a legacy of its Reformed Protestantism. However, the Protestant Deformation, because of its universalist and individualist creed, seeks the end of all nation states and to replace loyalty to America with gratification of oneself. It relentlessly undermines the authority of the United States, the superpower which promotes that creed throughout the world.

In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon once wrote that the Roman Empire spread the Christian religion throughout the ancient world, but that the Christian religion then undermined the Roman Empire. Now, the American empire is spreading the Protestant Deformation throughout the modern world, but the Protestant Deformation is beginning to undermine the American empire.

Perhaps one day, on the open and hostile terrain that has become the global economy and amid the empty formalisms of what was once liberal democracy, there will be found an individual. Once so intoxicated with his boisterous self-expression but now so exhausted from stress and strain, he at

last recognizes how lonely and isolated he has become. Then perhaps he will turn and seek his refuge and his safety in the protection of a hierarchy, the support of a community, and the comfort of traditions and customs. Then, too, he may turn and seek his salvation by opening himself to receive the grace of God.